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ABSTRACT

A study of the effects of the complexity of scenarios used in the Strategic Interaction Method of second language instruction had four scenarios of varying complexity performed by four university classes of students of English as a second language at varying levels. Indicators of complexity included the degree of verbalness, contextual constraint, formulaic language required, amount of grammar or artifact required to resolve the situation, and the amount of vocabulary or technical terminology needed. The measures used were mean length of utterance and verbal and nonverbal communication strategies used in the scenario performances. It is concluded that the complexity of the scenarios is important in the language learning process. Less complex scenarios promote more effective learning at lower levels, and more complex scenarios promote more effective interaction at higher levels. (MSE)

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# SCENARIOS FOR ENHANCING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Prior to the middle and late 1970's, teaching methods had focused almost exclusively on the teacher, who was restricted to the method which supposedly provided the answer to all pedagogical and most curricular questions. Textbook writers and course developers instructed teachers in what to do and how to do it (Altman, 1981:10).

Most methods of second-language instruction considered language as a product and not as a process. For example, the audio-lingual method, which is based on structural linguistics and behaviorist psychology, makes the assumption that all learning (including language acquisition) is a matter of conditioning. Habits are formed through responses to external stimuli. Through mimicry and memorization and through the repetition of patterned drills, one was expected to learn a second or foreign language (Newton, 1970:18).

Beginning in the late 1950's and continuing through the 60's and 70's, Noam Chomsky (1965) strongly criticized structural linguistics, claiming that habit formation is irrelevant for language learning. He emphasized that language learning is a creative process requiring cognitive growth rather than a response to an exterior stimulus. His theory for the derivation of surface structure from deep structure through transformational rules, as well as his emphasis on competence rather than performance, had considerable impact on the thinking of applied linguists and methodologists.

As a result of the generative grammarian's view that language is rule-governed and language learning is a natural creative process, teaching methods in the 1970's began to shift focus from the teacher to the learner. Corder (1977) maintains that in language teaching, the learner is being prepared to participate in a different social group; therefore, he/she avoids communication

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due to the fear of failure to fulfill his ends. He adds that linguists and sociologists started to call attention to the sociological dimension of language, i.e., to the way language behavior is responsive to various social situations.

Focus on the social dimension led to an enhanced concern with the role of the learner, his needs, attitudes and motivation, personality, and his learning strategies and styles. The view of language as a creative and natural process eventually gave rise to the distinction between language acquisition and language learning. Krashen highlights these two notions in his Monitor Model (1978:1).

Krashen maintains that second-language acquisition is an implicit process similar to what children experience in acquiring first language. For acquisition to take place, he adds, the learner needs to interact with the language spontaneously and naturally without focusing on the form of messages. Conscious learning, or monitor buildup, is explicit, however, and focuses on linguistic form rather than language use (Krashen 1981:1-2).

As a result of the change from teacher-centered to student-centered methodologies, and in response to Hymes' argument (1970:14) that there are rules of grammar which would be useless without rules of use and his notion of communicative competence, many innovative methods based on these principles have come to the fore over the last decade, for example, Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR), Curran's Community Language Learning (CLL), Di Pietro's Strategic Interaction, (SI), and Gattegno's Silent Way (SW). These methods have many features in common. Perhaps the main feature that they share is an effort to relate second language learning more closely to the cognitive and imaginative powers of the learner. In other words, they seek to involve the student more fully in the instructional process, making more active use of the student's mental powers than have traditional methodologies (Newton 1979:21). Another feature of these methods is that the teacher acts as a facilitator for learning. The students enjoy a democratic (Laforge 1975:19), friendly atmosphere,

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free from coercion or dominance, which encourages them to engage in receptive rather than defensive learning (Stevick 1976:109).

The focus of this paper is on Strategic Interaction Method (SI).

Strategic Interaction (SI), a student-centered method pioneered by Robert J. Di Pietro, is based on scenario and role-playing in the second language classroom. The goal is to help learners communicate in the target language spontaneously through pedagogical treatment in real-life situations.

The Three Dimensions of Conversational Discourse:

In SI methodology, three dimensions of conversation are recognized, subject to analysis and open to pedagogical elaboration:

1. The Informational Dimension, in which conversations are viewed as delivering referential meaning; this dimension includes the artifacts of language, i.e., the grammatical structure, semantics, and speech functions.
2. The Transactional Dimension, by which participants make use of language to motivate actions in their favor; what is said by the participants is looked at as the implementation of strategies, protocols and counterstrategies.
3. The Interactional Dimension, deals with how conversations reflect the performance of roles of various types, such as a curious neighbor or an obnoxious driver (Di Pietro 1981).

Classroom Procedures for the Implementation of SI:

1. The phases: time in the classroom is divided into three phases called: a) on-stage, b) off-stage, c) debriefing.

When students are performing in dialogs, they are "on-stage", i.e., they are exercising their competence in the language. In doing so, they are open to evaluation. During the "off-stage" phase, students are planning the scenario, acquiring the skills and information to perform by discussing and consulting with the instructor. After performance, a portion of class time is reserved for debriefing. During this stage, students analyze the

strategies used by different groups, and discuss some of the artifactual errors made by the learners.

The Dialog with Options

Dialogs between different persons usually have a variety of possible consequences. In the SI method, classroom dialogs are constructed to fit the various developmental streams they may follow. Thus, students are led to expect different reactions to what they may say and match the appropriate language to the situation. Even a simple request, such as "Mind if I smoke?" can stimulate, in response, a number of options:

Not at all | Well, this is a non-smoking section | If you must, | I wish you wouldn't

Fig. 1. Options for: Mind if I smoke?

To which the requester also can react in several ways:
Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know.
I'll go outside, then.
Well, I really need a smoke.
etc.

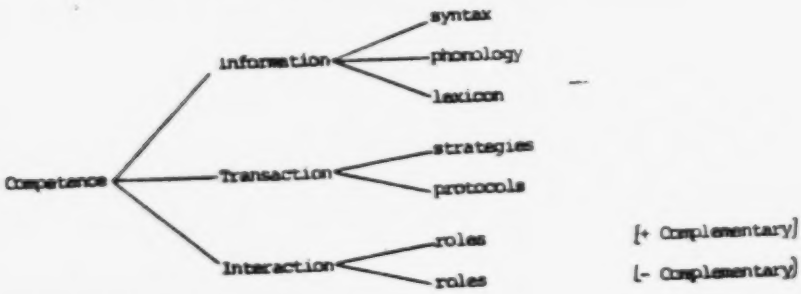
There is a strategy underlying each utterance. This strategy is used by the speaker to assert a certain stand or opinion.

The Scenario:

An effective way to promote learning through conversation in the classroom is to create scenarios designed to encourage students to react to specific problems in order to solve them in a dramatic way. The scenario technique is an effort to simulate real-life by creating a situation which stimulates a decision-making process through communication. The best way to insure dramatic tension in the scenario is to take them from real-life situations; for example, the mother who catches her child stealing cookies or candy while the doctor says that sugar is bad for the child's health.

Once the situation is determined, students are asked to form groups to develop the dialog on the topic at hand. During the on-stage phase of instruction, students stand before the class and play their parts. Of course, each side must anticipate the various options that the other side might take. Thus, the natural way in which conversations usually develop is imitated in the classroom.

A summary of SI theory can be described as follows:




roles + complementary: buyer/seller

roles - complementary : window shopper/seller

Fig. 2. Summary of SI Theory

This means that conversation is continued in the [+ complementary] roles whereas it is discontinued in the [- complementary] ones.

Sequencing of the Scenarios According to Complexity

Discourse can be both verbal and non-verbal. People usually use kinesics, proxemics, and eye-contact as means of communication in combination with language. People who are learning a second language need to use it in everyday life to fulfill their needs. SI, therefore, seeks to enable students to acquire the transactional, interactional, and artifactual dimensions of language use. Conversational discourse in a foreign language classroom reflects

varying degrees of complexity for the learners. These degrees of complexity may be programmable in a strategic interaction methodology.

Complexity here refers to verbal output, i.e., it is hypothesized that the more creative verbalization the learner needs to do, the more complex the scenario will be. Less complex scenarios should not demand much creative verbal language use, but should allow the learners the option of resolving a challenge through non-verbal interaction and formulaic or routinized utterances.

Measures of complexity in discourse are important because they should help both teachers and learners in second language teaching/learning situations.

Criteria for Scenario Complexity

1. It is hypothesized that scenarios with characteristics at the less verbal end of the continuum will be less complex.

2. A second measure of complexity is degree of contextual constraint. It is easier to communicate in a constrained context than in a less constrained one.

3. A third measure is the degree of formulaic language required. In routinized scenarios there are limits to the options for using language. An example of this is greeting such as "hello!", "hi!", "How are you?".

4. A fourth measure is that the greater the amount of artifact or grammar required to resolve the challenge of a scenario, the more difficult it will be.

5. A fifth measure for complexity is that the more vocabulary and technical terminology a scenario needs, the more complex it will be. For example, an argument between a student and a professor on certain points or ideas during a lecture is more difficult than one where everyday terms are used.

Method of Investigation:

In order to assess the extent to which the above factors influence scenario complexity, a two-stage investigation was

undertaken. The four scenarios given below were developed by the researcher.

The Four Scenarios

1. Smoking on the Plane/Bus/Train,(S) henceforth.

The setting is on an airplane where the seating is open, with no separation between smoking and non-smoking sections. Of two travellers seated in the same row, one is a smoker and the other is not. The smoker lights a cigarette. Develop the exchange that would occur between them.

2. Dinner at a Restaurant,(R) henceforth.

A foreigner goes to a restaurant for dinner. The waitress shows him to a table and gives him the menu. The foreigner looks at the menu but does not understand anything. When the waitress comes back for his order, he points to one item on the menu. When the food comes, he discovers that it is fish which he is allergic to.

a. How would the foreigner react?

b. How would the waitress react?

3. Picnicking on Private Property,(P) henceforth.

Some friends agree to go picnicking. In the morning they pack their food, drink, and games. They walk for a long time, then stop at what looks like a public park. They sit at a picnic-table and start unpacking while each one tells the others what he/she has brought. They have much fun but suddenly the woman who owns the property approaches them. She has been troubled by vandals who have done much damage to her property.

a. How would the landowner react?

b. How would the picnickers react?

4. The College Major Scenario,(M) henceforth.

After finishing high school, Ahmad is very excited at the idea of going to college. As he fills the university application form, his father approaches him and asks him about his favourite subject. Ahmad says that he is interested in sociology. His father who considers social science as trivial and has great respect for

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physical science gets angry and tries to persuade his son to change his mind in order to become either a doctor or an engineer. How would the father react?

In stage one the scenarios were presented in prose format to ten doctoral students in linguistics at the University of Delaware. They were asked to sequence the scenarios from least complex to most complex using the criteria.

The second stage of investigation involved the actual implementation of the four scenarios to four classes of EFL students.

Rating Results

Five raters rated scenario No. 1 (S) as the least complex, three rated No. 2 (R) as second in complexity, four rated No. 3 (P) as third, and eight rated No. 4 (M) as the most complex.

This sequence was compatible with that set by the researcher. This rating indicated that scenarios No. 1 and 4 were easily ranked by the raters, while 2 and 3 were more controversial.

Stage Two

Questions to be explored in this part of the study are:

1. How does communication develop in the SI classroom?
2. What kind of features index complexity in a scenario?

To answer the above questions, the researcher conducted study sessions at The Center for English as a Second Language of Delaware Technical And Community College in Wilmington, Delaware. All sessions were videotaped, transcribed and analyzed.

Subjects: A student survey was developed and administered to the 52 students who participated in the study. Their composition was 24 males and 29 females distributed on four levels: pre-technical, or most advanced, advanced, intermediate and beginners. They come from 25 countries and speak 12 different languages. Their ages ranged between 40 and 18 years.

The following measures were used:

a. Mean length of utterance.
b. Communication strategies, verbal and non-verbal.

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c. Transactional strategies.

d. Embedding depth of clauses.

Conclusions:

From the results of the data, it emerged that:

a. Scenario S is the least complex of the four scenarios because its problem can be resolved almost entirely through the use of non-verbal communication NVC.

b. Scenario R follows in complexity. It is contextually constrained and dependent on formulas and protocols such as "May I help you?". "What would you like to eat?" or "What would you like to drink?".

c. Scenario P is the third in sequence. The artifactual dimension posed some difficulty for the learners.

d. Scenario N is the most complex because it is "open-ended" and depends on technical terminology.

1. Advanced students appear to resolve simple scenarios in a simple way, and use complex ways in complex scenarios. One group in the most advanced level resolved scenario R non-verbally, whereas, the same group went beyond the episodic feature in scenario P and turned it to nonepisodic, so did one group for S scenario.

2. The concept of time is acquired late. Students, at all levels, had difficulty in understanding the concept of time in the phrase, 'She has been troubled by vandals who have done much damage to her property' (in scenario P). Students, at all levels, believed that the picnickers themselves were the vandals. Relating a past experience to a present one appeared to be beyond their competence.

When native speakers rated these scenarios, one of them gave it a one in complexity; i.e., he considered it the easiest scenario. This has an implication for second/foreign-language learning. When native-speaking instructors set the syllabus for second/foreign-

language learners, they must bear in mind that the notion of time may be especially complex, and thus present particular problems.

3. The scenario setup is a feature of difficulty.

There were no problems in the presentation of scenario S or R. Students, at all levels, did not encounter any problem in understanding their setup. Beginners appealed for assistance from peers who spoke their native language. Scenario P presented a different picture. However, the setup itself was very difficult for all levels. Two beginners were frustrated, started to cry, and wanted to quit. Bilingual dictionaries were seen for the first time. There was much more need for peer assistance in deciphering the setup at all levels.

When the setup follows an order of difficulty and the input is comprehensible, learners tend to be relaxed, thereby lowering their affective filter. As a result, acquisition should be enhanced (Krashen 1982:9). Schachter(1983:180-191) maintains that "if the learner does not receive comprehensible input, language learning simply will not take place".

Scenarios S and R were not challenging for the advanced students. It seems that they did not learn a lot from either. Scenario P was beyond the competence of the beginners because of the artifactual dimension as well as its setup. It was challenging for the intermediate and the advanced groups. The most advanced revealed their competence in the interactional and transactional dimensions. Scenario M was too far beyond the beginners' competence. Several groups reacted by avoiding the challenge, but those groups that chose to confront the challenge reported having learned a great deal from the resulting interaction.

The presentation of complex scenarios to advanced learners is highly recommended because such scenarios compel students to think and struggle with the language. Reflection is crucial here because it is the best way to help make learners communicationally independent, responsible, and creative. When learners are faced with a challenge, they have to depend on themselves to resolve it. Responsibility here is in the sense of a drive. It drives the



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learners to be alert, mentally active, and resourceful; otherwise they will not achieve their ends.

While high anxiety is detrimental to learning, the proper amount of what Leontiev (1981) calls operational tension may be necessary for acquisition to take place. Such tension provides learners with the motivation to confront the challenge. He maintains: "Operational tension is connected with the necessity of carrying out a particular activity: it allows a person to 'settle into' that activity, and always leads to the best possible performance. A driver in a rush hour, a pilot at landing, a teacher in his classroom - they all experience a state of operational tension."

*This example occurred in group 2 at the most advanced level (019) in scenario S:

S : (lights a cigarette).
NS: (coughs and pushes away the smoke with hand then says): Hi!
S : Hi!
NS: My name is Lina.
S : My name is Don. How are you?
NS: Fine, how are you?
S : Fine.
NS: Where are you from?
S : I'm from Venezuela, and you?
NS: I'm from Jerusalem.
S : Oh, Jerusalem! Nice country. (He smokes very nervously).
NS: You look nervous.
S : Yes, I am.
NS: Do you mind if I ask you a question?
S : I don't. What do you want to ask?
NS: *Why you are nervous?
S : I can't stand travelling on a plane.
NS: That's all?
S : Yes.
NS: *Can you put off your cigarette, please?
S : Why
NS: I have allergy. I can't stand smelling cigarettes.
S : Yeah. I'm sorry (extinguishes cigarette).

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